

Living in Turbulent Times

Monasteries, Settlements, and Laypeople in Late Byzantine Southwest Thrace

GEORGIOS MAKRIS

Thrace is perhaps best known for the Byzantine metropolis that was founded on its easternmost edge, Constantinople. Previous studies on Thrace have provided valuable and new information about individual monuments, the historical realities throughout the Byzantine millennium, and the relationship of the region with other important loci such as Macedonia in the west and Constantinople in the east.¹ Although prior archaeological work, particularly in western Thrace, focused on significant urban centers and monumental churches, our understanding of everyday life and

prevalent socioeconomic conditions in the hinterlands of towns and the rural countryside remains fragmented.² Thrace provides an attractive research context in which to examine the changes in the social and economic life of the empire over the long term, primarily because it did not witness a noticeable waning of imperial authority until the Ottoman advance in Europe in the second half of the fourteenth century. Moreover, Thrace lies along an important set of north–south land routes between the inner Balkans and the Aegean, and east–west links between Constantinople and Thessalonike.

Due to the disparate source material, the interpretation of the Thracian landscape requires an interdisciplinary methodology that combines written sources with evidence from excavation work and in situ study of settlement remains and their setting. A historical and archaeological investigation of southwest Thrace can help us answer questions about conceptions of land

1 The scholarship on Byzantine Thrace is voluminous. See C. Asdracha, *La région des Rhodopes aux XIII^e et XIV^e siècles: Étude de géographie historique* (Athens, 1976). On ecclesiastical history, see P. Georgantzes, *Η μητρόπολις Τραιανουπόλεως και αἱ ἐπισκοπαὶ αὐτῆς: Συμβολὴ εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν ἱστορίαν τῆς Θράκης* (Xanthi, 1981). See also C. Bakirtzis and D. Triantaphyllos, *Θράκη* (Athens, 1988); P. Soustal, *Thrakien* (Vienna, 1991); C. Bakirtzis and R. Ousterhout, *The Byzantine Monuments of the Evros/Meriç River Valley* (Thessalonike, 2007); A. Külzer, *Ostthrakien (Euröpe)* (Vienna, 2008), all with extensive bibliographies. See C. Bakirtzis, “Byzantine Thrace (AD 330–1453),” in *Thrace*, ed. V. Papoulia et al. (Thessalonike, 1994), 151–209, for an overview of archaeological sites. See also the various studies in C. Bakirtzis, ed., *Byzantine Thrace: Image and Character. First International Symposium for Thracian Studies, Komotini, May 28th–31st, 1987*, 2 vols., *ByzF* 14 (Amsterdam, 1989); C. Mango and G. Dagron, eds., *Constantinople and Its Hinterland. Papers from the Twenty-Seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Oxford, April 1993* (Aldershot, 1995); C. Bakirtzis, N. Zekos, and X. Moniaros, eds., *Byzantine Thrace: Evidence and Remains. Fourth International Symposium on Thracian Studies, Komotini, April 18th–22nd, 2007*, *ByzF* 30 (Amsterdam, 2011).

2 For the results of recent excavations across the Thracian plateau, see, selectively, various studies in Bakirtzis, *Byzantine Thrace*; Bakirtzis, Zekos, and Moniaros, *Byzantine Thrace*. For archaeological investigations at specific urban sites, see S. Doukata-Demertzi, *Παλιόχωρα Μαρώνειας: Η ανασκαφή της παλαιοχριστιανικής βασιλικῆς και του μεταβυζαντινού οικισμού* (Kavala, 2008), on Maroneia. On Mosynopolis, see N. Zekos, *Μαξιμιανούπολις-Μοσυνόπολις: Ανασκαφή περίκεντρου ναού* (Kavala, 2008). On Mount Papikion, see N. Zekos, *Mount Papikion: Archaeological Guide* (Thessalonike, 2001). S. Sinos, *Die Klosterkirche der Kosmosoteira in Bera (Vira)* (Munich, 1985), remains fundamental for the church of the Theotokos Kosmosoteira. See also Bakirtzis and Ousterhout, *Monuments of the Evros*.



Fig. 1. Southwest Thrace. Map courtesy Google; modified by Stella Makri.

ownership, the distribution and layout of settlements, and social composition in the late Byzantine period (fig. 1). In situating the local people—primarily from the upper levels of society—in their lived spaces, this study also considers the local elites’ interactions with other powerful political and institutional authorities such as the emperor and great Athonite monasteries.

Although similar questions have preoccupied historians and archaeologists of the late empire,³ I focus here on a region that remains poorly documented and whose records are partially unpublished. Acts of property donation and boundary surveys (*periorismoi*) from the archives of the Vatopedi monastery provide valuable

information about the names, origins, and social standing of actors who populated southwest Thrace and the types of land they possessed. The archaeological record complements the documentary evidence and offers us an opportunity to reconstruct the plan of late Byzantine civic centers. If brought together, the emerging picture refines our understanding of the local communities and their ways of engaging with the broader physical environment of southwest Thrace. The examination of the rural periphery of urban sites yields important insights into the relation of those who inhabited or controlled them to institutions and individuals of the outer world. The analysis of three case studies from Poroi, Peritheorion, and Xantheia allows us to consider these critical issues in the context of the territorially fragmented thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Byzantine empire.

Settlements, Connections, and Authority at Porto Lagos

The Excavated Evidence

From 1950 to 1952, Demetrios Lazaridis, then the Ephor of Antiquities for eastern Macedonia and Thrace, conducted excavations at the eastern edge of the modern village of Porto Lagos on the southern shore of Lake

3 See, for instance, A. E. Laiou-Thomadakis, *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire: A Social and Demographic Study* (Princeton, 1977); J. Lefort, “De Bolbos à la plaine du Diable: Recherche topographique en Chalcidique byzantine,” *TM* 7 (1979): 465–89; A. Dunn, “Loci of Maritime Traffic in the Strymon Delta (IV–XVIII cc.): Commercial, Fiscal and Manorial,” in *Oi Sέρρες και η περιοχή τους από την αρχαία στη μεταβυζαντινή κοινωνία. Σέρρες, 29 Σεπτεμβρίου–3 Οκτωβρίου 1993: Πρακτικά*, 2 vols. (Thessalonike, 1998), 2:339–60; idem, “From polis to kastron in Southern Macedonia: Amphipolis, Khrysoupolis, and the Strymon Delta,” in *Archéologie des espaces agraires méditerranéens au Moyen Âge. Actes du colloque de Murcie (8–12 mai 1992)*, *Castrum* 5 (Madrid and Rome, 1998), 399–413. See, more recently, F. Kondyli, “Lords at the End of the Empire: Negotiating Power in the Late Byzantine Frontiers (Fourteenth–Fifteenth Centuries),” *BSA* 112 (2017): 309–39.



Fig. 2. Excavated church, view toward the east, Poroi, Xanthi. Photo courtesy Xanthi Ephorate of Antiquities.

Bistonis.⁴ In searching for Dikaia, a major Archaic-Classical-Hellenistic city between the Nestos River and Mount Ismaros, Lazaridis found instead the remains of a Byzantine church with an inscribed-cross plan (fig. 2). The building measures ca. 18.85 by 14.10 meters, with the bases of the dome's supporting piers at approximately 1.40 by 1.40 meters. The tripartite sanctuary is formed by three semicircular apses that project beyond the naos. The base (1.64 by 0.90 m) of a marble altar was found in the main apse (length at 4.15 m). The archaeological report relates that the bays of the sanctuary were paved with marble. Sparse traces of colored mortar, detected in the fill of the western wall and the southern aisle, indicate that the interior walls were most likely painted. The building technique consists of freely mixed courses of rough stone and limestone, which belonged to earlier structures. Irregularly shaped stone

blocks and bricks of varying dimensions are inserted in the joints of the façade; these too constitute spolia from earlier buildings.⁵ In addition, spoliated pieces of architectural sculpture were incorporated into the west wall of the church. Noteworthy are two Doric capitals of the Hellenistic period; one of them was transferred to the nearby *metochion* of Saint Nicholas, to which we shall return.⁶ A tomb was uncovered in the south aisle of the church (fig. 3). Two subsidiary rooms adjacent to the north side were identified as either part of an ossuary or the baptistery. Based on architectural design and construction technique, Lazaridis noted similarities

4 The excavation results are summarized in C. Makaronas, "Αρχαιολογικά Χρονικά," *Μακεδονικά* 2 (1941–1952): 656–57.

5 For a discussion of additional spolia found in situ, see E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaïdou, "Χαλκοὶ σταυροὶ ἐκ τοῦ Περιθεωρίου," *Αρχαιολογικά Ανάλεκτα ἐξ Ἀθηνῶν* 5 (1972): 374–81.

6 The capital in the church of Saint Nicholas on the islet of Bourou was first seen by S. Kyriakides, *Θρακικά Ταξείδια: Μπουροῦ-Καλέ-Αναστασιούπολις-Περιθεώριον, Ἡμερολόγιον Μεγάλης Ἑλλάδος, 1931* (Athens, 1930), 215, fig. 11. The second was transferred to the Archaeological Museum of Komotini.



Fig. 3. Tomb in the south aisle, excavated church, Poroi, Xanthi. Photo courtesy Xanthi Ephorate of Antiquities.

with the church of Panagia Panaxiotissa at Gavrolimne in Aitolio-Akarnania, a classic example of the “transitional” inscribed-cross type, and he thus dated the excavated church to the tenth century.⁷

The excavated site at Porto Lagos did not become the subject of further archaeological investigation until 1980, when the former 12th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities resumed excavation under the directorship of Charalambos Bakirtzis. In the first preliminary season, Bakirtzis determined that the church was built, at least partially, over an earlier structure, the flooring of which was detected under the northwest corner of the tenth-century building.⁸ The reopening and extension of Lazaridis’s section to the northeast of the

church revealed five tombs that probably formed part of a broader cemetery. Two burials contained the bones of multiple adults, one belonged to an infant, but the remaining ones were found severely damaged and without skeletons.⁹ To the southwest of the church were the remains of a defensive wall. The ruins of a well-built and solid tower can be seen to the south of the church, about five meters from the sea (fig. 4). The tower was made of reused building blocks. From that point, and running parallel to the church eastward, stretches the defensive sea wall for about forty-two meters. The finds from the 1980 season included three bronze coins from the reigns of Galerius (305–311), Justin II (565–574), and Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118), all found in the cemetery. The

7 Makaronas, “Αρχαιολογικά Χρονικά,” 657.

8 C. Bakirtzis, “Αρχαιολογικές έρευνες στο Πόρτο Λάγος (Θράκη), έκθεση 1η Σεπτέμβριος–Οκτώβριος 1980,” in Fondation européenne

de la science, *Activité byzantine: Rapport des missions effectuées en 1980* (Paris, 1980), 47–75.

9 Ibid., 53–54.



Fig. 4. Southwest tower, Poroi, Xanthi. Photo courtesy Xanthi Ephorate of Antiquities.

remaining unstratified materials consisted of a few glass fragments from vessels and jewelry, a substantial amount of late Roman fineware and amphora sherds dating to the fourth–sixth centuries, and Byzantine glazed pottery dating to the seventh–fourteenth centuries. Collectively, they indicate uninterrupted activity on the site throughout the Byzantine millennium. Moreover, a large quantity of marine shells alongside animal bones came from various excavation strata, which provided to archaeologists proof that inhabitants gathered food and fish from the nearby sea and lagoon.¹⁰

In 1981, Bakirtzis and his team returned to the site and opened three trenches to the south and east of the church.¹¹ The pottery from trench A to the

southeast of the church included heavy utility vessels (amphorae), cooking pots, medium-sized storage vessels dating from the late Roman through the late Byzantine period, as well as a small number of glazed finewares dating to the tenth–fourteenth centuries. It was surmised that the assemblage constituted a refuse pit that was opened within an early Byzantine fill sometime in the tenth century, as indicated by the uncovered four folles of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos minted sometime in the period 945–950, and two folles dating to the joint reign of Constantine VII and Romanos II minted sometime between 950 and 959. Dug to the east of the church, trench B contained sherds dating from the late Roman through to the post-Byzantine period, while exclusively late Roman ceramics were collected

¹⁰ Ibid., 56–57.

¹¹ C. Bakirtzis, “Αρχαιολογικές έρευνες στο Πόρτο Λάγος (Θράκη), έκθεση 2η Οκτώβριος–Νοέμβριος 1981,” in Fondation européenne de

la science, *Activité byzantine: Rapport des missions effectuées en 1981* (Paris, 1981), 57–104.



Fig. 5. Remains of northern wall, view toward the east, Poroï, Xanthi. Photo courtesy Xanthi Ephorate of Antiquities.

from the lower strata. Found in this trench were a follis of Galerius minted in Thessalonike (308/310), a follis of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (945/950), and an anonymous follis (sometime between 975 and 1035). Excavation in trench C immediately south of the church produced predominantly late Roman pottery and a small number of sherds from the thirteenth century.

In the same season, cleaning and conservation work on the tower south of the church revealed that it was erected and remodeled in three distinct construction phases.¹² To the last, more carelessly executed phase, also belongs a part of the defensive sea wall. Surface materials collected from inside and around the tower included glazed ware sherds dated to the late Byzantine period, a number of unglazed wares, and a copper coin, which is also late Byzantine in date.¹³

In 1982, following the opening of a test trench on the northern side of the road that leads from Komotini to Xanthi toward Lake Bistonis and across the modern factory of ΚΥΔΕΠ, a significant section of the northern side of the wall was excavated approximately three meters below ground.¹⁴ The course of the wall was parallel to the modern road running east–west and along Lake Bistonis (fig. 5). The inner side of the excavated part was supported by a series of piers while the outer side, which faces the lake, was strengthened with four towers built with cut stones joined with mortar. Bakirtzis reported that due to the long-lasting operation of the wall as a source for building material, the collected finds constitute primarily unstratified data.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the glazed sherds ranged from the ninth to the fourteenth century, and thus match the pattern observed around the church and the southern wall. Equally noteworthy were the examples of imported pottery from other regions of the empire, though these have not yet been published. Brooches, buttons, small bronze crosses, and glass bracelets were also associated with the excavated section of the northern wall.

After the last field season and the unearthing of the northern wall, Bakirtzis concluded that the existence of

a sizeable church and a powerful defensive circuit wall, paired with the abundance of surface material across the entire strip of land between the modern village of Porto Lagos and the lagoon, provide evidence for the function of a substantial settlement on site and not of a *kastron* or *kastellion*, as previously thought.¹⁶ It was proposed that the site could be identified with Byzantine Poroi, a coastal city that was located between ancient Abdera (Byzantine Polystylon) and Maroneia. Moreover, Bakirtzis emphasized the settlement's engagement with trade and commerce, pointing in particular to the large quantity of amphora sherds found throughout the site in tandem with the comparatively low number of cooking wares. The Ephorate's investigations in the early 1980s in part supported Laskaridis's views of the site's multilayered history and assignment of the church to the tenth century. Apart from the existence of a commercially active fortified urban settlement, however, excavations yielded no concrete information that would help archaeologists determine its connection to the hinterland and contextualize it within its broader geopolitical and cultural milieu.

Byzantine Poroi stood on important land and sea routes between the Nestos River and the town of Koumoutzena (modern-day Komotini).¹⁷ The first reference to Poroi occurs when a local bishop named Nikephoros participated in the ecclesiastical synod of 879.¹⁸ As with other sites of this study, archival and literary references report that economic activity at Poroi gained momentum in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The site is recorded, for example, in John VI Kantakouzenos's *History* in the context of naval raids by the Turks of Aydin along the Thracian coast in the early 1330s; we read that in August of 1332 the ships of 'Umar of Aydin sailed from the island of Samothrace and disembarked at coastal Poroi (here as Porou).¹⁹ The Turks met with the soldiers

12 Ibid., 68–70.

13 Ibid., 70.

14 C. Bakirtzis, “Αρχαιολογικές έρευνες στο Πόρτο Λάγος (Θράκη), έκθεση 3η Οκτώβριος–Νοέμβριος 1982,” in Fondation européenne de la science, *Activité byzantine: Rapport des missions effectuées en 1982* (Paris, 1982), 5–27.

15 Ibid., 15.

16 Bakirtzis, “Αρχαιολογικές έρευνες 1981,” 70–71.

17 Soustal, *Thrakien*, 412.

18 J. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Graz, 1960), 376 B.

19 John VI Kantakouzenos, *Historiarum libri IV*, ed. L. Schopen, 3 vols., CSHB (Bonn, 1828–32), 1:470–71: Συμβέβηκε δὲ βασιλεία τε κατὰ τὰ Κουμουτζηνὰ πόλισμα τῆς Θράκης οὐ πολὺ ἀπωκισμένον τῆς θαλάσσης αὐλίσασθαι τὴν νύκτα, καὶ Ἀμοῦρ κατὰ τὴν Ποροῦν παράλιον τῆς Θράκης χώραν καταντικρὺ Κουμουτζηνῶν τὴν ἀπόβασιν ποιήσασθαι. See also Asdracha, *Région des Rhodopes* (n. 1, above), 103, n. 4.

of Emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos (1328–1341) in the nearby village of Panagia, but the battle was prevented. According to Kantakouzenos's description of the incident, Poroi was located on the Thracian coast opposite the town of Koumoutzena. We also learn from a patriarchal act of November 1381 that the metropolitan of the nearby town of Peritheorion, Dorotheos, was imprisoned on imperial orders in a tower at Poroi (πύργος τῶν Πόρων) but later managed to escape with the cooperation of Turkish forces.²⁰

The rich ceramic material from Poroi sheds light on the economy and use of such a regional commercial center; the Byzantine pottery recovered from both the circuit wall and the church indicates the uninterrupted use of the site until the late fourteenth century and into the post-Byzantine era, while the imported pottery points to its enduring, probably commercial, links with the outer world. In fact, Italian documents, noting that Genoese merchants loaded their ships with local grain for export at the harbor of Poroi, confirm that the port remained active and well connected with the hinterland in the southern Balkans for the better part of the fourteenth century.²¹ Standing at the point where the waters of the Aegean Sea meet Lake Bistonis, the fortified settlement evidently participated in the safeguarding of the Thracian coastline and towns in the vicinity but also ensured the safe passage of ships traveling to and from the lake. Indeed, the harbor could easily communicate with the town of Peritheorion built on the opposite shore of Bistonis, about half a day's journey away. Besides southwest Thrace, the strategic importance of coastal *kastra* is detectable in other parts of the southern Balkans as in the Strymon river delta, which was signposted by a series of fortifications. Interdisciplinary "multi-period" research has demonstrated through textual, topographical, and archaeological evidence that the fortified town of Chrysoupolis, which was continuously occupied from the tenth to the sixteenth century, belonged to a wider defensive network that included smaller building complexes, granges, and towers,

including Marmario.²² Due to their close proximity, the settlements in the Strymon delta controlled the north–south maritime corridor that led to the Aegean Sea, facilitated the collection of taxes, as well as the collection, shipment, and storing of local products such as fish, salt, and grain, and monitored monastic and privately owned estates in the vicinity.²³

The occupation in the Strymon river delta was at peak during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,²⁴ which was also the case for the entire region of Porto Lagos, as will be shown. Indeed, the topography of the Strymon, its access to important maritime and riverine trade routes, and the collaborative settlement system echo strongly the situation near and around Porto Lagos. Although identifying precisely the function of each site in either Porto Lagos or the Strymon delta is impossible, it is certain that the fortified port settlements shared certain qualities and served similar purposes in the late Byzantine period, including the import trade, the administration of estates, and the control of maritime traffic between the Aegean and the inner Balkan peninsula. Tracing the archaeological signature of these activities is difficult, though it is safe to point out that both Poroi and Peritheorion, being extensive well-fortified settlements, resemble more the *kastron* of Chrysoupolis in conception than the smaller installations in its periphery. Overall, the location of the town of Poroi attests to its close ties with the lake and its hinterland including Peritheorion; as such it cannot be interpreted as an isolated supply civic center. Examining the surviving evidence for the exploitation of the lake testifies to the existence of various economic interests in the area and their agency.

The Documentary Evidence

Written sources make it clear that at some point in the medieval period Bistonis came to be known as the Porou Lake, most likely because of the settlement of Poroi located at its southern shore.²⁵ During and

20 MM, 2:38.

21 A. E. Laiou-Thomadakis, "The Byzantine Economy in the Mediterranean Trade System: Thirteenth–Fifteenth Centuries," *DOP* 34–35 (1980/1981): 177–222, at 219.

22 Dunn, "From *polis* to *kastron*" (n. 3, above), 405–13. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to examine the settlement patterns in the Strymon river valley.

23 Kondyli, "Lords at the End of the Empire" (n. 3, above), 320–23.

24 Dunn, "From *polis* to *kastron*," 409.

25 Kyriakides (*Θρακικά Ταξείδια* [n. 6, above], 208) notes that the lake was known as Bourou in the Ottoman period.

following the second civil war of 1341–47 between John Kantakouzenos and the Constantinopolitan regency, substantial parts of western Thrace, including the civic centers of Xantheia, Polystylon, and Peritheorion, all located near Poroi, were caught up in the strife between Byzantium and Serbia. The advance of the Serbs in the southern Balkans reached its peak toward the end of the reign of Tsar Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (1331–1355), after he managed to occupy almost all of Albania, Epiros, Thessaly, and most of Macedonia except for the cities of Thessalonike and Berroia, the only ones to remain in Byzantine hands.²⁶ Following Dušan's death and the division of the conquered lands among various magnates, his widow, Queen Helena, who was based in the city of Serres, inherited her spouse's lands in southeastern Macedonia.²⁷ Helena's de facto power gradually diminished, however, and by 1366 one of her former courtiers, the Serbian despot John Uglješa, proclaimed himself governor of Serres and the neighboring lands, which most likely included Poroi and Lake Porou.

Although little can be said with certainty about the settlement of Poroi during the fourteenth century, our picture becomes more nuanced with regard to the relationship of its environs, particularly Lake Porou, with the Serbian ruler. The conditions around the lake can be explored through the archives of the Athonite monasteries. In an act of 1369, John Uglješa pledged to donate to the Vatopedi monastery (διδόναι δώρον) 120 *hyperpyra* per annum, extracted from the revenues of the lake of Porou.²⁸ Established at the midpoint of the northeast coast of the Mount Athos peninsula in the late tenth century, the Vatopedi

monastery was one of the most powerful and richest foundations on Mount Athos. The continuing privileges and donations given to the Vatopedi by all members of society testify to its preeminent position in the Athonite hierarchy. Vatopedi was in possession of significant land holdings in Chalkidike; in the cities of Berroia, Serres, Thessalonike, and their environs; on Mount Pangaion; on the island of Lemnos; and in Constantinople.²⁹ Uglješa acknowledged in formulaic language God's benevolence and expressed gratitude for divine protection after a successful period in office, and prayed for the prospective intercession of Christ and the Theotokos. The gift entailed spiritual benefits for the distinguished donor: the salvation of his soul would be achieved through the prayers of the monks of the Holy Mountain.³⁰ The act of gift-giving, by which a lay landowner donated, sold, or transferred lands or profit to a monastic institution, was a widespread phenomenon in the Byzantine world. What is clear as far as the local economy is concerned is that Lake Porou with the surrounding lands, being highly profitable possessions, constituted a pole of attraction for monasteries and wealthy private individuals, not only for the fish that supplemented the diet, but, more importantly, for the ready cash that came with the exploitation of commodities.³¹

A second document shows that Uglješa's donation to Vatopedi evidently functioned as a foothold in the area for the powerful Athonite monastery. In April 1371, the Serbian despot signed a second chrysobull, which granted to Vatopedi in unchallenged fashion the fishpond (βιβάριον) of Saint Theodore in the lake of Porou with all its possessions and property rights, including the fishing privileges in the lagoon (παντὸς γένους θαλαττίας ἀλίας).³² The timing of this chrysobull was

26 G. Soulis, *The Serbs and Byzantium during the Reign of Tsar Stephen Dušan (1331–1355) and His Successors* (Athens, 1995), 68–69; J. V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest* (Ann Arbor, 1987), 304–6.

27 Fine, *Late Medieval Balkans*, 364.

28 J. Lefort et al., eds., *Actes de Vatopédi*, vol. 2, *De 1330 à 1376* (Paris, 2006), 353–54, no. 133 (1369). It should be noted that discussion in this study revolves around the relationship of Vatopedi with the area of Lake Porou. Although there were other major monastic communities to the north (Mount Papikion) and east (Mount Ganos) of the lake, both within Thrace, there is no evidence indicating their connections with either the settlement of Poroi or the lake. On the history of the holy mountains of Papikion and Ganos, see G. Makris, "Monks and Monasteries of Byzantine Thrace, 10th–14th Centuries" (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2016).

29 For a detailed description of the possessions, see *Vatopédi*, 2:25–45.

30 *Vatopédi*, 2:354, no. 133 (1369): πρόσδεξαμένη ὡς δικέαν ψυχικῆς σωτηρίας ἔνεκεν. It should be noted that all citations from the Vatopedi archives are in diplomatic transcription.

31 The fishponds at a certain *poros* are also mentioned in other fourteenth-century sources. See, for example, MM, 2:217, no. 469 (1392). For commentary and a useful discussion of the economic importance of fish and fishing rights on the Thracian coast, see Asdracha, *Région des Rhodopes*, 200.

32 *Vatopédi*, 2:367–69, no. 137 (1371). Here, ἀλεία might also refer to the charge in kind paid by fishermen to the landowner of a fishery.

crucial: Ottoman expansion in the Balkans was well under way, and by 1370 major Thracian cities including Didymoteichon, Philippoupolis, and Adrianople had been conquered.³³ It seems that Uglješa assessed the magnitude of the Ottoman threat and realized that it was impossible to put an end to it without a conflict; the wording of this act is very different from the conventional language in the despot's first deed of gift, pointing to the idiosyncratic urgency of the time. It might be that under such insecure circumstances Uglješa donated the fisheries, perhaps in the hope that a wealthy monastery like Vatopedi would be able to protect the lands from conquerors by negotiating with them. At the beginning of his document, he explicitly expressed his concern for the imminent war against the Turks and stated that he decided to move to the Holy Mountain in order to pay his tribute to the Theotokos.³⁴ Having displayed her allegiance toward Uglješa's glorious predecessors, the Mother of God would assure this time hope and protection for his immediate future. The despot's benefaction did not save him from a tragic end; only a few months later, in September of 1371, he was killed in the Battle of the Maritsa River.³⁵

As for Porou, the two acts point out that the lake and the smaller lagoons in the south, which were connected to the Aegean littoral, were profitable and suitable for fishing. This information is also corroborated in the accounts of the modern inhabitants of Porto Lagos, who made a living by fishing in these waters until the mid-twentieth century.³⁶ The prominent position of Poroi on the coastline points to its engagement with the inland settlements, and it is to the Thracian hinterland that this study will now turn

its attention, to examine the role of the local population in the area and illuminate the broader defensive scheme of southwest Thrace, of which the fortified settlement was part.

Moving Further Inland: Monasteries and Laypeople in the Lake's Environs

The Vatopedi Dossier

Another set of documents reveals that Vatopedi began to acquire estates in the lands between Poroi and Peritheorion as early as the late eleventh century. Evidence comes from a chrysobull of 1080 issued by Emperor Nikephoros Botaneiates, which granted complete exemption from land tax (*ἐξκουσσείας*) to five properties (*κτῆματα*) of Vatopedi in the immediate surroundings of Peritheorion, including the field of Salama (*ὁ τοῦ Σαλαμᾶ καλεῖται*), along with the *metochion* inside the town, as well as estates near Chrysoupolis in southeastern Macedonia.³⁷ After a period of silence in the sources, it was in the late Byzantine period that Vatopedi apparently acquired more immovable fortunes in Peritheorion. The published Athonite archives provide valuable information about land ownership, local toponymy, and the several stages in the process of land accumulation practiced by the great monastery in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

An act of 1287 signed by an imperial official, George Galenos, enumerates the landed possessions donated by an unnamed lay patron (*κτῆτωρ*) to the monastery of Saint George Kalamitziotis situated near Peritheorion.³⁸ The properties, which the patron had inherited from his or her parents (*γονικῇ γῇ*), comprised a vineyard of seven *modioi*, an orchard, a field in the area of Toumba (*Τούμβαν*) near the town of Xantheia further west, and several other arable lands totaling approximately 162 *modioi*. According to the act, the donation was made specifically in exchange for spiritual benefits, a common practice among Byzantine patrons: the monks of Saint George would pray for the emperor, the army, and the Christian populace.³⁹

See, for example, P. Lemerle et al., eds., *Actes de Lavra*, vol. 2, *De 1204 à 1328* (Paris, 1977), 162, no. 104 (1317); 222, no. 109 (1321). I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this reference.

33 For the final part of the Ottoman conquest of Thrace, see G. Voyadjis, *Η πρώτη Οθωμανοκρατία στη Θράκη: Άμεσες δημογραφικές συνέπειες* (Athens, 1998), 115–36.

34 *Vatopedi*, 2:368, no. 137 (1371): Ὅθεν καὶ ἡ βασιλεία μου, τῇ ἐλπίδι αὐτῆς καυχωμένη καὶ ὅπλα κατὰ τῶν ἀθέων μουσουλμάνων αἰρῶσα, δεῖν ἐγνώ ἵνα (καὶ) πρὸς τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος παραγένηται καὶ ἀφοσιώσῃται ταύτῃ τῇ Θεομήτορι τὰς εὐχὰς καὶ τὴν δουλικὴν προσκύνῃσιν.

35 D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261–1453* (London, 1972), 286.

36 Personal recording of interviews conducted in 2015 for the Molyvoti Thrace Archaeological Project (MTAP) with Thomas F. Tartaron.

37 J. Bompaigne et al., eds., *Actes de Vatopedi*, vol. 1, *Des origines à 1329* (Paris, 2001), 109–14, no. 10 (1080).

38 *Vatopedi*, 1:177–79, no. 22 (1287).

39 See *ibid.*, 178.

Almost a decade from that first act, in 1296, another court official, named Katakalon, issued an act that gave back to the monastery the same list of holdings recorded in the previous document, in addition to several other lands.⁴⁰ This new document relates that the estates outlined in the act of 1287 were found near the compound at Kalamitzi and came to be regarded as previously owned possessions (τὰ προκατεχόμενα); added to these were new estates, including a vineyard next to the main church (*katholikon*) of Saint George, an orchard, and the fields surrounding the courtyard (περίβολος) of the church, along with other lands in the vicinity of Kalamitzi and on the route that led to the town of Xantheia, totaling 233 *modioi*.⁴¹ With this new act, the monastery of Saint George Kalamitziotis also received mills in and around the village of Kalamitzi, a field taken as surplus from the estate of a certain lay woman called Akropolitissa, and another mill that was found inside the latter's estate.⁴² The document also specifies that the field in Toumba—first mentioned in the act of 1287—was adjacent to a public route that led to the town of Xantheia and another road in Kalamitzi.⁴³ Here too, in return the monks would perform prayers for the emperor, the military, and the Christian flock. From the description of the exact location of the granted estates, it becomes clear that the locality of Kalamitzi, where the monastery of Saint George was established, was to be found somewhere in the valley between the *kastra* of Peritheorion and Xantheia. The late fourteenth-century copy of this generous act of donation was certified by the metropolitan of Ainos and the bishop of nearby Polystylon, Peter.

Though the remains of the foundation of Saint George have not been identified, it is notable that many of its properties were located near streams (ρέουσαι) and rivers (ποταμοί). This concern for water supply makes all the more sense if one takes into account, on the one hand, monastic founders' preference for abundant and accessible water resources and, on the other, the local topography: Kalamitzi was located close to the lake of

Porou, where numerous small rivers and streams met.⁴⁴ Although the act does not reveal the identity of the lay patron, the proximity of the donated lands to the monastery indicates that they might have originated in the local community. It is noteworthy that at least three of the estates belonged to or neighbored the properties of a local woman, Akropolitissa, which might indicate her close connection to the monastic community of Saint George.

In 1305/1320 a third eponymous act of donation by a lay woman, Theodora Komnene Senacherina,⁴⁵ documents the next unavoidable step in the life cycle of the monastery of Saint George Kalamitziotis.⁴⁶ With this new act, the well-to-do woman donated to Vatopedi three of her patrimonial estates (γονικὰ κτήματα) for the salvation of her soul (ψυχοφελές), the remission of her sins (ἐξείλασμον τῶν ἐμῶν ἐγκλημάτων), and in commemoration (μνημόσυνον) of the emperor and her parents.⁴⁷ Through this act, Vatopedi became the recipient of the monastery of Saint George Kalamitziotis, here called a *monydrion* (a small monastery), along with all its movable and immovable assets, which were situated in Theodora's private lands in Kalamitzi, as enumerated and recorded in the previous acts. Moreover, the Athonite monastery was granted half of an estate at the locality of Selarion, which belonged to Theodora and her sister, the latter a Glabaina, except for 300 *modioi*, which were given to their finance manager in Xantheia. The third type of granted property consisted of Theodora's inherited pasture lands on the mountains north of Xantheia, including an estate called τὸ Πηγὰδην, which hints at the existence of a water source, probably a well. The document bears the signatures of Theodora, her finance manager Leo, who acted as a witness, two administrators of the bishopric of Anastasioupolis (medieval

40 Ibid., 179–82, no. 23 (1296).

41 Ibid., 181–82.

42 For Akropolitissa, see *PLP* 90053.

43 *Vatopédi*, 1:181, no. 23 (1296): χωράφιον εἰς τὴν Τούμβαν πλησίον τῆς δημοσιακῆς ὁδοῦ τῆς εἰς τὴν Ξάνθει(αν) ἀπερχομένης, τῶν δύο ρεουσ(ών) καὶ τῆς ἐτέρ(ας) ὁδοῦ τῆς εἰς τὸ Καλαμύτιν. . . .

44 On the relationship between natural environment and ascetic practice, see A.-M. Talbot, "Founders' Choices: Monastery Site Selection in Byzantium," in *Founders and Refounders of Byzantine Monasteries*, ed. M. Mullett (Belfast, 2007), 43–62; T. Kiousopoulou, "Ἡ γεωγραφία των βυζαντινῶν μοναστηριῶν: Παρατηρήσεις για μία τυπολογία," in *Υψηλίδες: Μελέτες Ἱστορίας, Αρχαιολογίας καὶ Τέχνης στη μνήμη της Στέλλας Παπαδάκη-Oekland*, ed. O. Gratsiou and C. Loukos (Herakleion, 2009), 95–106.

45 *PLP* 25157.

46 *Vatopédi*, 1:224–28, no. 38 (1305).

47 Ibid., 227.

Peritheorion), and the archbishop of Xantheia.⁴⁸ This record of donation traces the line of ownership for the estates of Saint George Kalamitziotis from 1287 and 1296, and shows that Theodora Senacherina acted as the primary donor and head of household at least by the early fourteenth century.

Ultimately, Theodora's gifts of property to Vatopedi concluded with the donation of a *metochion* located in Xantheia. A confirmatory chrysobull by Emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos from 1329 enumerates all the possessions of Vatopedi on and off the Athonite peninsula; apart from the aforementioned estates at Kalamitzi near Peritheorion, Selarion, and Xantheia, the list includes a *metochion* of Saint Panteleimon in Xantheia along with a vineyard, an orchard, and some parcels of land.⁴⁹ The document specifies that the properties, including the dependency of Saint Panteleimon, were donated by Akropolitissa in accordance with a *prostagma* of Emperor Michael IX Palaiologos (1295–1320) issued in 1320 at the latest. The document's mention of Akropolitissa as the owner and donor of all landholdings led the editors of the Vatopedi archives to suggest that she should be identified with Theodora Komnene Senacherina, known from the 1305/1320 act.⁵⁰ It was further assumed that the laywoman might have been married to an Akropolites, and had made the donations upon his death. In light of this record, the editors of the archives drew attention to the fact that in the act of 1305/1320, with which Theodora granted a substantial part of her landed fortune to Vatopedi, her signature included her first name followed by her family name, Senacherina.⁵¹ According to the editors, the absence of references to her spouse's name (Akropolites) coupled with Theodora's assumed

role as sole patron (κτητόρισσα) and, most likely, head of household, seem to suggest that by 1305/1320 she had become a widow.

Although the identification is possible given the fact that the estates enumerated in the 1329 chrysobull are the same as those mentioned in the acts of 1296 and 1305/1320, whether Theodora Senacherina can be identified with the laywoman called Akropolitissa remains an open question that does not affect the scope of this study. The aim is to investigate the locations and spatial configuration of the urban settlements in the geographically privileged region around Porou Lake, and the relationship of these loci with people and institutions as well as with the natural environment. Evidently, by virtue of the 1305/1320 act, the estates at Kalamitzi—including the *monydion* of Saint George—as well as those at Selarion, and Xantheia had most likely become part of Theodora's dowry, over which she had complete control, as indicated by her signing of the donation act.

Another set of acts from Athos provides further evidence about the estates at Selarion and Kalamitzi. The first document makes it possible to trace the property at Selarion in the vicinity of Xantheia.⁵² The act describes the territorial limits of the property, which was apparently located near a spring and was adjacent to a public road that led south from the town of Xantheia. In the document, an Akropolitissa is again listed as the property holder—as in the act of 1296—which reiterates the Vatopedi editors' theory that she is to be identified with Theodora, who might have been married to Akropolites prior to her generous donation to Vatopedi in 1305/1320. It is explicitly stated that Selarion bordered to the north the aforementioned field in Toumba, also called *Bigla tou Senachereim*.⁵³ The fact that the Toumba field belonged to the Senachereim family suggests that Theodora's and Glabaina's patrimonial field at Selarion was also part of their dowry or inherited property.⁵⁴ The remains of Selarion lay, in all likelihood, near the modern-day village of Selero, as the similarity in names suggests, in a fertile position about five kilometers southeast of modern-day Xanthi (medieval Xantheia) and west of Peritheorion.

48 A.-M. Talbot ("Searching for Women on Mt. Athos: Insights from the Archives of the Holy Mountain," *Speculum* 87.4 [2012]: 995–1014, at 1000, n. 27) reminded us that the scribe most likely appended Theodora's signature in the document. See *Vatopedi*, 1:226, no. 38 (1305).

49 *Vatopedi*, 1:370–76, no. 68 (1329), at 375: Εἰς τὸ Περιθεώριον μετόχιον εἰς ὄνομα τοῦ Ἀγ(ίου) Γεωργίου μετὰ τῆς νομῆς καὶ περιοχῆς αὐτοῦ (καὶ) τῆς περὶ αὐτὸ γῆς τῆς ἐπιλεγομένης τοῦ Σελαρίου. κατέχουσι δὲ οἱ αὐτοὶ μοναχοὶ καὶ πλανητὴν εἰς τὰ βουνὰ τῆς Ξανθείας ἐπιλεγομένην τοῦ Βοῦ τὸ Πηγάδιον. ἕτερον μετόχιον εἰς τὴν Ξάνθειαν εἰς ὄνομα τοῦ Ἀγ(ίου) Παντελεήμονος μετὰ τοῦ ἐκείσε ἀμπ(ε)λ(ίου) καὶ περιβολίου καὶ τῆς μερικῆς γῆς. ἅπερ ἐκτήσατο ἡ εἰρημένη σεβασμία μονὴ ἀπὸ προσενέξεως τῆς Ἀκροπολιτίσσης.

50 See the discussion in *ibid.*, 1:225–26, no. 38 (1305).

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*, 1:228–29, no. 39 (beginning of fourteenth century?).

53 *Ibid.*, 1:229: ἀνέρχετ(αι) ἕως τὴν τοῦμβαν τὴν λεγομ(έν)ην Βίγλαν τοῦ Σεναχηρείμ.

54 *Ibid.*, 1:226, no. 38 (1305).

A partially surviving copy of an early fourteenth-century tax register defines the limits of the entire property in Kalamitzi near Peritheorion, a substantial part of which Theodora Senacherina eventually donated to Vatopedi in 1305/1320, including the *monydrion* of Saint George Kalamitziotis.⁵⁵ Here again, the property of 1500 *modioi* is described as belonging to Akropolitissa (γῆ τῆς Ἀκροπολιτίσσης). Kalamitzi was most likely situated between the modern-day villages of Sounion and Amaxades-Monachoi (literally meaning “monks”) about one kilometer northeast of the medieval ruins of Peritheorion. In the 1970s during a brief archaeological survey by the Greek Archaeological Service in the surrounding fields, the discovery of mostly prehistoric sherds near a hill (Τούμβα) pointed to the existence of an earlier settlement.⁵⁶ The name *Toumba* itself may allude to a time when a hill was the distinctive feature of the natural landscape. Today at the center of Amaxades-Monachoi is a well and next to it a copious spring. Outside the village and next to a stream are the remains of a mill that dates probably to the Ottoman period.⁵⁷ It is worth recalling that among the properties in Kalamitzi which a lay patron first assigned to the monastery of Saint George in 1296 were “single-eyed” mills (μονόφθαλμος), “two-eyed” mills (double, horizontal-wheeled watermills), and a field located in the so-called *Toumba*. Water mills were a common feature of monastic properties and ensured the productivity of an estate.⁵⁸

The archival evidence raises some crucial questions about local settlements and their connections to Vatopedi. Why was the monastery of Saint George in Kalamitzi important for the region? Was its establishment the reason for the territorial association between Vatopedi and southwest Thrace? With regard to the lay people involved, and Theodora Senacherina in

particular, what was their social standing? And why did these multiple land transactions take place at this particular moment?

Social Threads and Motives for Donation

The monastery of Saint George in Kalamitzi was a relatively modest family foundation, as the term *monydrion* indicates, and was in all likelihood founded by Theodora's parents, members of the family of Senachereim. The acts set forth that Theodora donated first to the house of Saint George and subsequently to the Athonite monastery parts of her patrimonial lands (γονικὰ κτήματα). The strong familial links and, in turn, the private status of Saint George also emerge from Theodora's wording in the petition section of the act of 1305/1320, when she asks for commemorations of her parents.⁵⁹ Saint George managed to remain independent even after the founders' death and until the early fourteenth century, when it was donated to the more powerful Athonite house.

Theodora Senacherina and her sister Glabaina were wealthy aristocratic women who owned estates in and around the towns of Xantheia and Peritheorion. The sisters were married to men of an equally privileged social status, whose family names suggest their membership in the high aristocracy of the Palaiologoi.⁶⁰ Although the nature of the surviving sources makes it impossible to determine the identity of Theodora's father or husband, it is certain that her father belonged to the extended family of Senachereim, a powerful and rich aristocratic family that remained connected to the imperial court and whose members are frequently recorded occupying important military and administrative posts.⁶¹ Leaving aside individuals who were active beginning in the mid-fourteenth century onward, but also those excluded because their genealogy is well documented or because they lived in Asia Minor, a brief

55 Ibid., 1:230–32, no. 40 (beginning of fourteenth century).

56 *Αρχ.Δελτ.* 30 (1975): 304.

57 Personal observation.

58 On the existence of water mills on monastic properties, see A. Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire: 900–1200* (Cambridge, 1989), 131–33. For archaeological evidence, see M. Hahn, “The Berbati-Limnes Project: The Early Byzantine to Modern Periods,” in *The Berbati-Limnes Archaeological Survey, 1988–1990*, ed. B. Wells and C. Runnels (Stockholm, 1996), 345–451, at 363–64, 367–68, 437. On late Byzantine water mills, see S. E. J. Gerstel, *Rural Lives and Landscapes in Late Byzantium: Art, Archaeology, and Ethnography* (New York, 2015), 124–27 (with previous bibliography).

59 *Vatopédi*, 1:227, no. 38 (1305).

60 On late Byzantine aristocracy, see the fundamental studies by A. E. Laiou, “The Byzantine Aristocracy in the Palaiologan Period: A Case of Arrested Development,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 131–51; D. Kyritses, “The Byzantine Aristocracy in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1997). For a concise overview of previous scholarship and suggestions for further research, see D. Stathakopoulos, “The Dialectics of Expansion and Retraction: Recent Scholarship on the Palaiologan Aristocracy,” *BMGS* 33.1 (2009): 92–101.

61 Kyritses, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 269–70.

prosopographic survey of the lesser-known men of these high-profile families demonstrates their political and financial potency. John Angelos Senachereim, for example, is attested in 1296 in Constantinople as the holder of the most important military office, that of *megas domestikos*.⁶² Another, a certain Angelos Senachereim, was *megas stratopedarches*—a military officer in charge of provisioning the army—in 1308.⁶³

As for the pre-1305/1320 Akropolites clan, also attested in the acts through a female figure, apart from the two well-known figures of Constantine and George, I was able to find only a Leo Akropolites, who served as *doux* (governor) of the themes of Serres and Strymon in eastern Macedonia ca. 1310.⁶⁴

Theodora's sister Glabaina also bears an illustrious family name. Here too, there are a number of high-ranking officials attested in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Nicholas Glabas held the office of the *megas papias*—middle-ranking military commander of aristocratic origin—ca. 1300, while another Glabas is known to have been the *megas dioiketes* in Constantinople ca. 1330, a function pertaining to the management of state taxes.⁶⁵ In the Lavra archives there is a reference to a great landowner named Glabas in the Chalkidike ca. 1288.⁶⁶ It is also worth noting a certain George Glabas bearing the title of *megalyporochos* in 1301, a dignity that nonetheless seems to have been of comparatively low status by the Palaiologan era.⁶⁷ This brief prosopographical exercise serves to emphasize the strong presence of the Akropolites, Senachereim, and Glabas families in the public administration. If viewed in tandem with Theodora's patrimonial estates in Thrace, prosopographical information gains further relevance because it sheds light onto the profile of several high-ranking individuals of an elite aristocratic group, whose wealth could indeed derive from landed property and military command.

Due to her privileged social and economic status and the ensuing familial networks that came with that, Theodora Senacherina emerges as a rare example of a documented aristocratic woman of southwest Thrace in the early Palaiologan period. Written records and material culture provide evidence about the important role of elite women, especially once widowed, in acting as primary benefactors or sponsors of monastic foundations throughout the late Byzantine period.⁶⁸ Upon their husbands' death, Byzantine women assumed control of their properties and acquired the legal right to manage their dowry as they saw fit.⁶⁹ Indeed, the surviving documentary sources, including wills, records of land transactions, and *typika*, speak in particular to widows' increased financial freedom during this period.⁷⁰ This phenomenon was the result of women's easier access to and more flexible administration of dowry property, coupled with the prominent involvement of the aristocracy as a whole in the economic life of the late empire, which was further fueled by the general political upheaval.⁷¹ Hence, Theodora's gift to Vatopedi seems to be related mainly to the increasing

68 E. Koubena, "A Survey of Aristocratic Women Founders of Monasteries in Constantinople between the Eleventh and Fifteenth Centuries," in *Les femmes et le monachisme byzantine. Actes du symposium d'Athènes, 28–29 mars / Women and Byzantine Monasticism. Proceedings of the Athens Symposium, March 1988*, ed. J. Y. Perreault (Athens, 1991), 25–32; A.-M. Talbot, "Building Activity in Constantinople under Andronikos II: The Role of Women Patrons in the Construction and Restoration of Monasteries," in *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography and Everyday Life*, ed. N. Necipoğlu (Leiden, 2001), 329–44. See, most recently, the various studies in L. Theis et al., eds., *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond*, *WJKg* 60/61 (Vienna, 2014).

69 A. E. Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society," *JÖB* 31 (1981): 233–61. On legal measures that prohibited the alienation of dowry properties, see R. Macrides, "Dowry and Inheritance in the Late Period: Some Cases from the Patriarchal Register," in *Eherecht und Familiengut in Antike und Mittelalter*, ed. D. Simon (Munich, 1992), 89–98; A. E. Laiou, "Marriage Prohibitions, Marriage Strategies and the Dowry in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium," in *La transmission du patrimoine: Byzance et l'aire méditerranéenne*, ed. J. Beaucamp and G. Dagron (Paris, 1998), 129–60. See also, Talbot, "Searching for Women" (n. 48, above), 1002–4; S. E. J. Gerstel and S. Kalopissi-Verti, "Female Church Founders: The Agency of the Village Widow in Late Byzantium," in Theis et al., *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond*, 195–211; D. Stathakopoulos, "I Seek Not My Own: Is There a Female Mode of Charity and Patronage?," in *ibid.*, 383–97.

70 Gerstel and Kalopissi-Verti, "Agency of the Village Widow," 197.

71 Laiou, "Role of Women," 251.

62 *PLP* 25150.

63 *PLP* 25146. The editors of the Vatopedi archives have noted the case of a certain Senachereim who was commander of an army in Xantheia in 1204; see *Vatopédi*, 1:226, no. 38 (1305). The date of 1204, however, seems to be too early to make him eligible to be Theodora's father.

64 *PLP* 521.

65 *PLP* 27507; *PLP* 4215.

66 *Lavra*, 2:84–85, no. 90 (1300).

67 *PLP* 4220.

tendency and ability of women to administer ancestral property in the later period.⁷² It is safe to argue that the possible ownership of the estates at Kalamitzi, Selarion, and Xantheia in the form of a dowry or inheritance most likely explains Theodora's successive donations of extensive landed holdings.

A woman's motive for an act of benefaction varied from the purely financial consideration of sustaining oneself or one's close relatives to the ultimate spiritual benefit of a peaceful afterlife.⁷³ In Theodora's case, the Athonite act of 1305/1320, which is the only one that explicitly mentions her name, emphasizes that as a patron she was driven by the standard anxiety for salvation. Inspired by God's profound prudence, at the outset Theodora enumerated her motivating forces: forgiveness for her crimes (ἐγκλήματα), for she was probably aware of her sinful life, and the salvation of her deceased parents' and the holy emperors' souls, which would be achieved through commemorative services. At that moment, having outlived her husband and parents, Theodora most likely felt closer to the life beyond than ten or twenty years earlier when she made her first donations to her small foundation of Saint George. In other cases of monastic endowment too, the death of the benefactor's family members is indicated as a primary motive for spiritual patronage. Michael Attaleiates, the founder of an almshouse in Rhaidestos and a church of Christ Panoiktirmon in Constantinople, for example, relates that it was his wife's dying wish that prompted him to proceed to charitable activities.⁷⁴

72 For the early days of this phenomenon, see the late eleventh-century will of Kale Pakouriane, a resident of Constantinople, as analyzed in A.-M. Talbot, "Une riche veuve de la fin du XI^e siècle: Le testament de Kalè Pakourianè," in *Impératrices, princesses, aristocrates et saintes souveraines: De l'orient chrétien et musulman au moyen âge et au début des temps modernes*, ed. É. Malamut and A. Nicolaidès (Aix-en-Provence, 2014), 201–14. See also Gerstel and Kalopissi-Verti, "Agency of the Village Widow," 198, who also note the increasing financial freedom of provincial non-elite women in the later period.

73 R. Morris, *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium, 843–1118* (Cambridge, 1995), 120–42; V. Dimitropoulou, "Giving Gifts to God: Aspects of Patronage in Byzantine Art," in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. L. James (Chichester, UK, and Malden, MA, 2010), 161–70 (with previous bibliography).

74 P. Gautier, "La Diataxis de Michel Attaliat," *REB* 39 (1981): 5–143, at 19; A.-M. Talbot, trans., "Rule of Michael Attaleiates

Apart from the multiplicity of the stated motives, the prevalent historical realities might have had an impact on Theodora's decision to donate her lands. The final decade of the thirteenth and especially the first of the fourteenth century were filled with insecurity at a regional level: Thrace was in the midst of intense military upheavals. In 1285, toward the end of a civil war in Bulgaria between the tsars George Terter I (1280–1292) and Ivan Asen III (1279–1280), a Tatar general named Nogaj Khan, who allied with the Byzantines to support Ivan Asen III, led a ravaging army that plundered territories south of Bulgaria in Thrace and Macedonia.⁷⁵ By 1305, the mercenaries of the Catalan company had already conquered the fort of Gallipoli (present-day Gelibolu) and were launching raids in eastern Thrace.⁷⁶ The Catalans' departure from the Dardanelles region in 1307 due to lack of food supplies and their subsequent attacks on western Thrace and Macedonia caused much destruction to several cities, and one would assume that the area between Xantheia and Peritheorion suffered from the invasion too.⁷⁷ In light of such tumultuous circumstances, Theodora's wish to express gratitude to the Christ-loving army (φιλόχριστος στρατός) might reflect her fear of the imminent dangers.⁷⁸



The Vatopedi acts coupled with the archaeological evidence from Poroi highlight that the importance of fortified cities was evidently augmented from the late thirteenth century onward with the gradual fragmentation of the empire.⁷⁹ This phenomenon is partly reflected in the increasing participation of Thracian cities in the military and political developments of the period due to their strategic location in the heartland of a much-diminished Byzantine state. Peritheorion, for example, which formed the base of Theodora's

for His Almshouse in Rhaidestos and for the Monastery of Christ Panoiktirmon in Constantinople," *BMFD* 1:333.

75 Fine, *Late Medieval Balkans* (n. 26, above), 198–99.

76 A. E. Laiou, *Constantinople and the Latins: The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282–1328* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), 147, 163–64.

77 Ibid., 191.

78 A brief perusal of the published volumes of the Vatopedi acts yielded no other dedications of donations to the army.

79 See S. Kyriakidis, *Warfare in Late Byzantium, 1204–1453* (Leiden, 2011), 157–66.

properties, played a key defensive role in controlling a plateau that included an important section of the Via Egnatia during the civil wars of the fourteenth century.⁸⁰ As we saw above, Poroi controlled important lines of trade and communication and protected local populations.

Unlike other regions of the empire, the information about the social composition of Thrace's urban sites in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is rather indirect and originates in mainly historical accounts rather than documentary sources. Nevertheless, a careful perusal of the references to the populates of Peritheorion and Xantheia makes it possible to raise a few points about the profile and distinguishing characteristics of important landowners in the region. With regard to the city's population, in his *History* Kantakouzenos noted the traditional division of the inhabitants among the *dynatoi* (powerful) and the *phauloi* (poor), without giving more details about their access to power and resources.⁸¹ Yet, as Angeliki Laiou has shown, such *dynatoi* were people of moderate means and holdings, who survived while enjoying a certain degree of political power within their city or community.⁸² Occasional references to specific lay families in Peritheorion and other cities, however, indicate that the high aristocracy consisted of a few powerful families that were granted Thracian estates by the emperor, as the latter consistently strove to secure the loyalty of the former.

In the beginning of the fourteenth century, for example, the Synadenoi are recorded as owning vast holdings in the cities of Bizye (modern-day Vize), Ainos (modern-day Enez), and Adrianople (modern-day Edirne).⁸³ Emperor John Kantakouzenos himself most likely had property in Gallipoli and vast properties across Thrace, while the *sebastokrator* and governor of Peritheorion, John Asan, possessed by imperial grant large estates near Traianoupolis as well as the fortress of Epibatai between 1343 and 1345.⁸⁴ These cases demonstrate that, in taking advantage of their court connections, *oikeioi* (friends) or relatives of the emperor received privileges and established themselves

in Thracian territories. At a certain level, it seems that in Thrace the decentralization of power was conceived and encouraged by the central government, which gave large parts of the region to members of the extended imperial family. This evolution is exemplified by the case of Matthew Kantakouzenos, who ca. 1347 was assigned by his father John the western part of Thrace to govern.⁸⁵ All the aforementioned individuals and, as the prosopography suggests, Theodora Senacherina and her family too, belonged to an aristocracy, which did not necessarily oppose the Constantinopolitan administration but rather grew out of it. To be sure, this phenomenon did not apply only to Thrace, as it has been noted in other regions of the empire as well.

Due to their landed fortune such elites remained rooted in the major cities of Thrace, which then gave them the right to claim political authority over substantial territories at times of political upheaval. Indicative of the significant power that property ownership brought to established local families was the reception of John Kantakouzenos's proclamation as emperor at Didymoteichon in 1347; although originally in favor of his plans, following his proclamation the wealthy aristocrats of nearby Adrianople changed sides to the Constantinopolitan regency headed by Alexios Apokaukos.⁸⁶ The geographical proximity coupled with the close political links of many Thracian landowners with Constantinople meant that some pursued a semi-autonomous policy in line with the conditions and developments in the capital.

As shown above, the town of Peritheorion, where most of the estates analyzed were situated, had been severely affected by the radical changes in the political scene and social stratification of the empire. In general, aside from the emergence of a dynamic aristocracy, the incursions of external cultural forces in conjunction with the Byzantine civil wars had impoverished the peasant populations of Thrace, causing severe problems of land devastation and food supply. The area of Peritheorion, however, including the fertile valley around the city, Xantheia, and Lake Porou, remained highly profitable and well populated. Due to its commercial links with the Aegean and the availability of arable lands, the region attracted members of the most influential and powerful groups of Palaiologan society,

80 Asdracha, *Région des Rhodopes* (n. 1, above), 100–101.

81 Kantakouzenos, *Historiarum libri IV* (n. 19, above), 2:214.

82 Laiou, "Byzantine Aristocracy" (n. 60, above), 132, 149–50.

83 Kyritses, *Byzantine Aristocracy* (n. 60, above), 104–5.

84 Ibid., 106.

85 Nicol, *Last Centuries* (n. 35, above), 238.

86 Ibid., 199–201.

including great families with landed wealth; the large monastery of Vatopedi representing the church; and the powerful men (*dynatoi*) of the town whose names do not appear in the sources. As a group, however, they exerted military authority in places where the government could no longer intervene.

In the final section of this study I present the situation on the ground. In other words, my aim is to detect if the competing economic and political interests are somehow reflected in the material remains of the region.

Settlements in an Insecure Landscape: Xantheia and Peritheorion

Throughout the Palaiologan period, most Byzantine territories in the Balkans—including Thrace—were affected by warfare. This meant that the empire's defensive system relied heavily on the strength of fortified towns, which sprang up across the peripheries from the mid-thirteenth century. The key function of these towns was to provide refuge to inhabitants of the neighboring countryside. The construction and maintenance of fortifications were the responsibility of the emperor, and increasingly in the later Byzantine period of wealthy high aristocrats. Moreover, men with more moderate holdings but considerable military personnel, who originated in and enjoyed the support of the local community, also assumed the task of building or repairing fortifications.⁸⁷

Peritheorion and Xantheia constituted important *kastra*. Similarly, Poroi, as the excavated evidence shows, incorporated towers and fortifications and was active as a defensive base until the end of the fourteenth century. The remains at both Peritheorion and Xantheia have not been the subject of archaeological investigation and it is not my aim to offer a detailed architectural analysis of the remains; rather I will explore the importance of these towns as evinced in literary sources and material culture. Understanding the topography of these settlements helps us visualize the immediate hinterland of Poroi which, as shown above, was the subject of multiple transactions between lay patrons and Vatopedi. Narrative written sources and inscriptions provide valuable material for the profile of these forts while exalting their importance for defensive purposes.

Xantheia became a central node in the defense network of Thrace from the fourteenth century onward.⁸⁸ Situated on the Via Egnatia, the town was the major stronghold in an area that included a series of villages and smaller castles, all located a short distance from one another. It was still regarded as a village in the *typikon* of the monastery of Theotokos Petritzonitissa by Gregory Pakourianos, who owned estates there by imperial order.⁸⁹ The town of Xantheia and the villages (*choria*) in the immediate sphere, such as Selarion and Toumba, gained prominence due to the military developments in the region throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In his description of the short-lived appanage of the Bulgarian brigand Momčilo (d. 1345), which comprised the lands from the Nestos in the west to the town of Gratianou in the east, Nikephoros Gregoras relates that several villages and towns (*πολίχνια τε καὶ χωρία*) were found south of the Rhodope Mountains and between Xantheia and Peritheorion.⁹⁰ These were modest, yet highly profitable rural settlements such as Kalamitzi and Selarion. Moreover, indicative of the area's value is the fact that Xantheia and the surroundings were incorporated into the principality of Matthew Kantakouzenos in western Thrace.⁹¹

Built next to the river Kossinites on the elevated ground of the slopes of the Rhodope Mountains, the castle of Xantheia has the plan of an irregular rectangle.⁹² Overlooking the modern town and the valley beneath, the circuit wall is reinforced by several

88 On the history of Xantheia, see S. Kyriakides, *Περὶ τὴν ἱστορίαν τῆς Θράκης: Ὁ Ἑλληνισμὸς τῶν συγχρόνων Θράκων. Αἱ πόλεις Ἐάνθη καὶ Κομοτηνὴ* (Thessalonike, 1960); P. A. Pantos, "Ἱστορικὴ τοπογραφία τοῦ νομοῦ Ἐάνθης," *Θρακικὰ Χρονικά* 32 (1975–1976): 1–26; Asdracha, *Région des Rhodopes*, 93–98; P. Georgantzes, *Συμβολὴ εἰς τὴν ἱστορίαν τῆς Ἐάνθης* (Xanthi, 1976); D. Triantaphyllos, "Ἀρχαιοτῆτες καὶ μνημεῖα Θράκης," *Ἀρχ. Δελτ.* 33 (1978): 305; Bakirtzis and Triantaphyllos, *Θράκη* (n. 1, above), 21–24; Soustal, *Thrakien* (n. 1, above), 501–2.

89 P. Gautier, "Le typikon du sébaste Grégoire Pakourianos," *REB* 42: 5–145, at 127; R. Jordan, trans., "Typikon of Gregory Pakourianos for the Monastery of the Mother of God Petritzonitissa in Bačkovo," *BMFD* 2:507–63, at 555.

90 Nikephoros Gregoras, *Historia romana*, in *Nicephori Gregorae historiae Byzantinae*, ed. L. Schopen and I. Bekker, 3 vols., CSHB 19 (Bonn, 1829–55), 2:727–28. On Momčilo and his principality, see Fine, *Late Medieval Balkans* (n. 26, above), 304–5.

91 Gregoras, *Historia romana*, 2:814.

92 C. Bakirtzis, "Βυζαντινὴ Θράκη (330–1453)," in *Θράκη*, ed. V. Papoulia et al. (Athens, 1994), 171–73.

87 Kyriakidis, *Warfare*, 160–61.



Fig. 6. Tower, view toward the north, Xanthi. Photo author.

towers and encloses a substantial area to the north of the church of the Taxiarchs (fig. 6). Similar to Poroi, the wall was built of large blocks, mortar, and stones. The exact date of the castle's construction is unknown, but the standing remains point to its operation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁹³ Though no inscriptions have been discovered, it is inside and in the vicinity of the fortification that Theodora Senacherina possessed properties, as indicated in the Vatopedi acts.

Located on the northern shore of the lake of Porou across from Poroi, the fortified site of Peritheorion witnessed habitation since antiquity.⁹⁴ There is a legend suggesting the foundation of Anastasioupolis by

Emperor Anastasios I (491–518) at the same spot.⁹⁵ In the eleventh century Gregory Pakourianos owned an *aule* inside the fort as well as fields in the immediate periphery.⁹⁶ Pakourianos's explicit mention of Peritheorion as a garrison indicates the town's strategic importance for the protection of the local lands and people since the eleventh century. After a period of silence in the sources, Peritheorion, like Xantheia and Poroi, reemerges in the fourteenth century when it was included among Andronikos III's rebuilding projects in Thrace and Macedonia. In fact, John Kantakouzenos states that the town was deserted and that it was

93 Ibid., 171.

94 On Peritheorion, see Kyriakides, *Περὶ τὴν ἱστορίαν τῆς Θράκης*, 31; Bakirtzis and Triantaphyllos, *Θράκη*, 36; C. Asdracha and C. Bakirtzis, "Inscriptions byzantines de Thrace (VIII^e–XV^e siècles):

Edition et commentaire historique," *Arch.Δελτ.* 35 (1980): 241–82; Asdracha, *Région des Rhodopes*, 98–104.

95 Kantakouzenos, *Historiarum libri IV*, 1:542.

96 Gautier, "Grégoire Pakourianos," 37; trans. *BMFD*, 2:541. An *aule* consisted of a group of buildings in a courtyard.

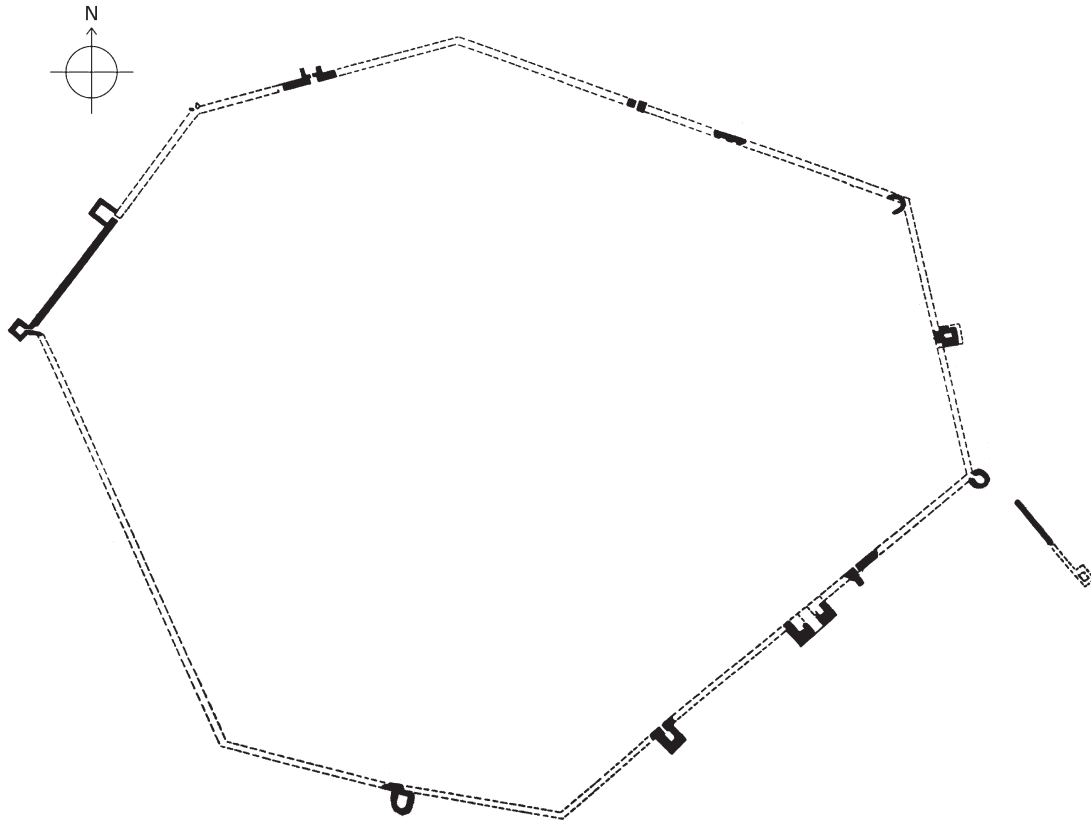


Fig. 7. Plan of *kastron*, Peritheorion, Rhodope. Redrawn after V. Papoulia et al., eds., *Θράκη* (Athens, 1994), 172; courtesy Charalambos Bakirtzis.

Andronikos who gave the name Peritheorion to the restored part of ancient Anastasioupolis ca. 1341.⁹⁷ This revival in the town's fortunes is also mirrored in its promotion to a metropolis at this time.⁹⁸ It is noteworthy that Theophanes, metropolitan of Peritheorion, composed the *vita* of Saint Maximos the Kausokalybite in the fourth quarter of the fourteenth century—he was a former superior of the Vatopedi monastery.⁹⁹ Kantakouzenos hinted at the strength of the fortifications when describing the town as impregnable.¹⁰⁰ The information provided by the emperor is corroborated by the extant remains of the fortifications.

97 Kantakouzenos, *Historiarum libri IV*, 1:542.

98 PG 107:401.

99 See *PLP* 7616.

100 Kantakouzenos, *Historiarum libri IV*, 3:311: Ματθαῖος δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς δέσας, μή τι κακουρηθῇ περὶ τὴν πόλιν (ἥδει γὰρ ἀνάλωτον τειχομαχίᾳ ἐσομένην), στρατιώτας ἔπειμψε φρουρεῖν. . .

The enclosing wall of the town is of an irregular trapezoidal plan with its southern part being the longest (fig. 7). It is strengthened by circular and square towers—four on the north and south side respectively, two on the west, and one on the east (fig. 8). Parts of the wall connecting the towers have collapsed. The monograms of the Palaiologan dynasty together with the apotropaic abbreviations IC-XC-NI-KA (Jesus Christ, conquer) are inscribed on several towers and the walls flanking the southern arched gate of the town that led to the lake (figs. 9 and 10).¹⁰¹ This evidence confirms Kantakouzenos's testimony of the renovation conducted during the reign of Andronikos III.

Together with Xantheia to the west and Poroi in the south, Peritheorion formed a defensive line that controlled the movement of armies and commodities across the enclosed valley in between. Its key location

101 Asdracha and Bakirtzis, "Inscriptions byzantines de Thrace," 246–50.



Fig. 8. Eastern tower, Peritheorion, Rhodope. Photo author.



Fig. 9.
Monogram on
northern tower,
Peritheorion,
Rhodope. Photo
author.



Fig. 10.
South gate,
Peritheorion,
Rhodope. Photo
author.

as a stopping point on the east–west trajectory of the Via Egnatia and on the north–south corridor between the Rhodope Mountains and the Aegean Sea made Peritheorion in particular an important stronghold for Palaiologan elite figures such as Kantakouzenos in the second half of the fourteenth century.¹⁰²

As for the years during which Theodora Senacherrina possessed landholdings in the region, the Catalan chronicler Ramon Muntaner relates that the countryside between Xantheia and Peritheorion was naturally productive; among the events of the Catalan campaign, Muntaner describes the Thracian valley where the commander Berengar de Rocafort and his army stationed for a night ca. 1307 as covered in gardens, for there was every kind of fruit befitting the season, and good water and plenty of wine, which the soldiers found in all the houses.¹⁰³ It was in the same environs (*proasteia*) of Peritheorion that the local metropolis is said to have owned fields, vineyards, gardens, and mills, according to a document of the first half of the fourteenth century.¹⁰⁴

Conclusions

The presence of multiple investors in the lands around the lake of Porou indicates the availability of natural space and resources. The activity of high aristocrats such as the families of Senachereim and Akropolites, or later John Uglješa, was not a limiting factor for the simultaneous emergence of the *dynatoi*, who exercised administrative power at a local level. At the same time, the Palaiologan dynasty acknowledged the agricultural and commercial importance of the area early on by wielding authority there time and again. Properties and commercial routes were safeguarded through large fortifications and small monastic establishments like that of Saint George Kalamitziotis, which provided shelter to the peasants cultivating the fields. These social actors had to share the lands with successful monasteries such as Vatopedi, which initiated their territorial expansion in the eleventh century and continued to be associated with the region through lay donations well into the fourteenth. Inevitably, as modest foundations

diminished and laypeople began to struggle due to the increasing instability, it was the grand monastery that remained viable and dominant. The lay donations to Vatopedi were part of a long-established Athonite tradition of property expansion well beyond the peninsula. Lake Porou and the surrounding agricultural area near the Thracian coast are situated within easy reach from Mount Athos and communication was achieved most likely by sea.

The various economic and building enterprises around the lake of Porou reflect the growing value of the lands vis-à-vis other territories more distant from Constantinople in the period prior to the Ottoman conquest of the area in the late fourteenth century. At first, it was members of the aristocracy who established their economic base in towns like Peritheorion and Xantheia, often with the emperor's support. These individuals coexisted with a middle-ranking provincial aristocracy whose members remain primarily anonymous. At the same time, the emperor and large monasteries, and later, albeit momentarily, the new ruling power of the Serbs represented by John Uglješa, increasingly invested unprecedented amounts of money in the natural resources and towns of the region, as it provided them with safe access to Constantinople, the interior of the Balkans, and the Aegean Sea. Due to moderate rates of settlement and less intensive exploitation in previous centuries, the fertile countryside of southwest Thrace could feed everyone in the late Byzantine period.

In examining cases of specific individuals who populated the fortified towns between the Nestos River and the lake of Porou, it becomes clear that despite the turmoil of a civil war and successive military incursions, the urban settlements managed to survive and evidently prosper. Narrative sources as well as archival and archaeological evidence point to dynamic patterns of habitation in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, especially at Poroi, and an adaptability of at least the visible members of the local society to changing conditions. In contrast to other regions of the empire or even neighboring Macedonia, the emperor was physically and actively present in Thrace, and thus his links with the local governing authorities were far more concrete and discernible. In other words, the towns relied heavily on imperial support, which came not just in the form of grants or tax exemptions to individuals, but through armed forces and building projects, as attested in the monograms of Peritheorion.

102 On the road system of Thrace, see Soustal, *Thrakien* (n. 1, above), 132–46, esp. 136–37.

103 R. D. Hughes, *The Catalan Expedition to the East: From the Chronicle of Ramón Muntaner* (Barcelona, 2006), 120.

104 MM, 1:332, no. 147 (1354).

A principal way of controlling and protecting the productive territories and the lagoon was the rebuilding and strengthening of fortifications, which then became the new focal points of the region, forging connections with neighboring areas and other important urban centers, including Philippoupolis, Didymoteichon, and Constantinople.¹⁰⁵ The unstable and complicated world of late Byzantium caused the transformation of the townscapes of Xantheia and Peritheorion, whose peripheries were deemed valuable for the imperial office, the aristocracy, and the Athonite monastery of Vatopedi. The function of a solid defensive wall at Poroï points to similar practices there too. The large-scale construction and the uncovered pottery confirm that the region around the lake had gained military importance, as the emperor was in greater need of resources to supply his campaigns. Yet he was extremely mobile, which meant that Thrace also witnessed the rise of powerful aristocrats.

The story of Theodora Senacherina offers a rare opportunity to address issues of aristocratic property ownership and patterns of donation in a part of the empire for which the reconstruction of social composition is a difficult task.¹⁰⁶ Scholars have emphasized that the European hinterland of Constantinople was dominated by a high aristocracy that was connected to the imperial court.¹⁰⁷ Members of the Senachereim, Akropolites, and Glabas families belonged to this group, and it was a widowed woman who emerged as a donor. Theodora's vast ancestral properties confirm the concept of a powerful elite group that was solidly based in urban spaces while investing in the countryside.

105 On city links, see Asdracha, *Région des Rhodopes*, 29–42.

106 This discrepancy was first noted in *ibid.*, 214.


107 Laiou, "Byzantine Aristocracy," 143.

Her donations to Vatopedi and especially those of John Uglješa can perhaps be understood in light of the empire's geopolitical deterioration over the course of the fourteenth century.

This response, however, points to perhaps the most resilient institution of the later period, monasticism. Although this study underscores the indirect involvement of the monasteries of Saint George and Vatopedi in the economic life of the region, it is the impact of these institutions on the social and natural landscape that becomes more apparent. It is tempting to propose that the political chaos led the inhabitants to actions that essentially benefited the great monastery of Vatopedi, which, as shown above, already had a foothold in the region. The role of the monasteries was to boost the local economy by employing local peasants, maintaining settlements, fortifications, and estates, and exporting the surplus in products.

A final remark concerns methodology: the interdisciplinary framework that combined an investigation of the natural landscape and historical topography with an analysis of written sources and archaeological evidence has allowed us to document the distribution of settlements but also to understand the social and cultural attitudes of laypeople and institutions in the less-documented hinterlands of late Byzantine Thrace.

Department of Art History,
Visual Art, and Theory
The University of British
Columbia
400–6333 Memorial Road
Vancouver, BC
Canada V6T 1Z2
georgios.makris@ubc.ca

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